

THE BURGLAR WHO THOUGHT HE WAS BOGART

A BERNIE RHODENBARR MYSTERY

LAWRENCE BLOCK



A DUTTON BOOK

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**THE BURGLAR
WHO THOUGHT HE
WAS BOGART**

The Bernie Rhodenbarr Mysteries

Burglars Can't Be Choosers

The Burglar in the Closet

The Burglar Who Liked to Quote Kipling

The Burglar Who Studied Spinoza

The Burglar Who Painted Like Mondrian

The Burglar Who Traded Ted Williams

The Burglar Who Thought He Was Bogart

For OTTO PENZLER

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ONE

At a quarter after ten on the last Wednesday in May, I put a beautiful woman in a taxi and watched her ride out of my life, or at least out of my neighborhood. Then I stepped off the curb and flagged a cab of my own.

Seventy-first and West End, I told the driver.

He was one of a vanishing breed, a crusty old bird with English for a native language. "That's five blocks, four up and one over. A beautiful night, a young fella like yourself, what are you doing in a cab?"

Trying to be on time, I thought. The two films had run a little longer than I'd figured, and I had to stop at my own apartment before I rushed off to someone else's.

"I've got a bum leg," I said. Don't ask me why.

"Yeah? What happened? Didn't get hit by a car, did you? All I can say is I hope it wasn't a cab, and if it was I hope it wasn't me."

"Arthritis."

"Go on, arthritis?" He craned his neck and looked at me. "You're too young for arthritis. That's for old farts, you go down to Florida and sit in the sun. Live in a trailer, play shuffleboard, vote Republican. A fellow your age, you tell me you

broke your leg skiing, pulled a muscle running the marathon, that I can understand. But arthritis! Where do you get off having arthritis?"

"Seventy-first and West End," I said. "The northwest corner."

"I know where you get off, as in get out of the cab, but why arthritis? You got it in your family?"

How had I gotten into this? "It's posttraumatic," I said. "I sustained injuries in a fall, and I've had arthritis complications ever since. It's usually not too bad, but sometimes it acts up."

"Terrible, at your age. What are you doing for it?"

"There's not too much I can do," I said. "According to my doctor."

"Doctors!" he cried, and spent the rest of the ride telling me what was wrong with the medical profession, which was almost everything. They didn't know anything, they didn't care about you, they caused more troubles than they cured, they charged the earth, and when you didn't get better they blamed you for it. "And after they blind you and cripple you, so that you got no choice but to sue them, where do you have to go? To a lawyer! And that's worse!"

That carried us clear to the northwest corner of Seventy-first and West End. I'd had it in mind to ask him to wait, since it wouldn't take me long upstairs and I'd need another cab across town, but I'd had enough of—I squinted at the license posted on the right-hand side of the dash—of Max Fiddler.

I paid the meter, added a buck for the tip, and, like a couple of smile buttons, Max and I told each other to have a nice evening. I thought of limping, for the sake of verisimilitude, and decided the hell with it. Then I hurried past my own doorman and into my lobby.

Upstairs in my apartment I did a quick change, shucking the khakis, the polo shirt, the inspirational athletic shoes (*Just Do It!*) and putting on a shirt and tie, gray slacks, crepe-soled black shoes, and a double-breasted blue blazer with an anchor em-

bossed on each of its innumerable brass buttons. The buttons—there'd been matching cuff links, too, but I haven't seen them in years—were a gift from a woman I'd been keeping company with awhile back. She had met a guy and married him and moved to a suburb of Chicago, where the last I'd heard she was expecting their second child. My blazer had outlasted our relationship, and the buttons outlasted the blazer; when I replaced it I'd gotten a tailor to transfer the buttons. They'll probably survive this blazer, too, and may well be in fine shape when I'm gone, although that's something I try not to dwell on.

I got my attaché case from the front closet. In another closet, the one in the bedroom, there is a false compartment built into the rear wall. My apartment has been searched by professionals, and no one has yet found my little hidey-hole. Aside from me and the drug-crazed young carpenter who built it for me, only Carolyn Kaiser knows where it is and how to get into it. Otherwise, should I leave the country or the planet abruptly, whatever I have hidden away would probably remain there until the building comes down.

I pressed the two spots you have to press, then slid the panel you have to slide, and the compartment revealed its secrets. They weren't many. The space runs to about three cubic feet, so it's large enough to stow just about anything I steal until such time as I'm able to dispose of it. But I hadn't stolen anything in months, and what I'd last lifted had long since been distributed to a couple of chaps who'd had more use for it than I.

What can I say? I steal things. Cash, ideally, but that's harder and harder to find in this age of credit cards and twenty-four-hour automatic teller machines. There are still people who keep large quantities of real money around, but they typically keep other things on hand as well, such as wholesale quantities of illegal drugs, not to mention assault rifles and attack-trained pit bulls. They lead their lives and I

lead mine, and if the twain never get around to meeting, that's fine with me.

The articles I take tend to be the proverbial good things that come in small packages. Jewelry, naturally. Objets d'art—jade carvings, pre-Columbian effigies, Lalique glass. Collectibles—stamps, coins, and once, in recent memory, baseball cards. Now and then a painting. Once—and never again, please God—a fur coat.

I steal from the rich, and for no better reason than Robin Hood did: the poor, God love 'em, have nothing worth taking. And the valuable little items I carry off are, you will note, not the sort of thing anybody needs in order to keep body and soul together. I don't steal pacemakers or iron lungs. No family is left homeless after a visit of mine. I don't take the furniture or the TV set (although I have been known to roll up a small rug and take it for a walk). In short, I lift the things you can live without, and which you have very likely insured, like as not for more than they're worth.

So what? What I do is still rotten and reprehensible, and I know it. I've tried to give it up, and I can't, and deep down inside I don't want to. Because it's who I am and what I do.

It's not the only thing I am or do. I'm also a bookseller, the sole proprietor of Barnegat Books, an antiquarian bookstore on East Eleventh Street, between Broadway and University Place. On my passport, which you'll find in the back of my sock drawer (which is stupid, because, trust me, that's the first place a burglar would look), my occupation is listed as bookseller. The passport has my name, Bernard Grimes Rhodenbarr, and my address on West End Avenue, and a photo which can be safely described as unflattering.

There's a better photo in the other passport, the one in the hidey-hole at the back of the closet. It says my name is William Lee Thompson, that I'm a businessman, and that I live at 504 Phillips Street, in Yellow Springs, Ohio. It looks authentic, and well it might; the passport office issued it, same as the other

one. I got it myself, using a birth certificate that was equally authentic, but, alas, not mine.

I've never used the Thompson passport. I've had it for seven years, and in three more years it will expire, and even if I still haven't used it I'll probably renew it when the time comes. It doesn't bother me that I haven't had occasion to use it, any more than it would bother a fighter pilot that he hasn't had occasion to use his parachute. The passport's there if I need it.

I wasn't likely to need it tonight, so I left it right where it was. I also left my stash of cash, which I didn't expect to need either. The last time I counted it was down to around five thousand dollars, which is lower than I like it. Ideally I ought to maintain an emergency cash reserve of twenty-five thousand dollars, and I periodically boost it to that level, but then I find myself dipping into it for one thing or another, and before I know it I'm scraping bottom.

All the more reason to get to work.

A workman is as good as his tools, and so is a burglar. I picked up my ring of picks and probes and odd-shaped strips of metal and found room for them in a trouser pocket. My flashlight is the size and shape of a fountain pen, and I tucked it accordingly into the blazer's inside breast pocket. I didn't have to keep the flashlight hidden away—they sell them in hardware stores all over town, and it's no crime to carry one. But it is definitely a crime to carry burglar's tools, and the simple possession of a little collection like mine is enough to net its owner an extended vacation upstate, all expenses paid. So I keep them locked up, and stow the flashlight with them so I won't forget it.

Same with the gloves. I used to wear rubber gloves, the kind you put on when washing dishes, and I'd cut the palms out for ventilation. But now they have these terrific disposable gloves of plastic film, light as a feather and cool as a gherkin, and you can buy a whole roll of them for pocket change. I tore off two gloves and put the rest back.

I secured the secret compartment, closed the closet, snatched up the attaché case, let myself out of the apartment, and locked all the locks. All of this takes longer to report than to perform; I was in my apartment by ten-thirty and out of it, dressed and equipped and back on the street, by a quarter to eleven.

There was a cab cruising by as I cleared the threshold, and I could have sprinted and whistled and caught it. But it was hardly the sort of night when cabs were likely to be in short supply. I took my time, walked to the curb at a measured pace, held up a hand, and beckoned to a taxi.

Guess who I got.

"What you shoulda done," Max Fiddler said, "was tell me you had someplace else to go. I coulda waited. How's your leg now? Not too bad, right?"

"Not too bad," I agreed.

"It's good luck, finding you again. I almost didn't recognize you, all dressed up and everything. Whattaya got, if you don't mind my asking? A date? My guess, it's a business appointment."

"Strictly business."

"Well, you look very nice, you make a good appearance. We'll take the Transverse, okay? Go right through the park."

"Sounds good."

"Minute I dropped you off," he said, "I said to myself, Max, what the hell's the matter with you, man's got arthritis and you didn't tell him where to go. Herbs!"

"Herbs?"

"You know about herbs? Chinese herbs, like from a Chinese herb doctor. This woman gets into my cab, using a cane, has me take her down to Chinatown. She's not Chinese herself, but she tells me about this Chinese doctor she goes to. When she started with him she couldn't walk!"

"That's wonderful," I said.

"Wait, I haven't even told you yet!" And, even as we entered

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Central Park, he launched into a tale of miracle cures. A woman with horrible migraines—cured in a week! A man with high blood pressure—back to normal! Shingles, psoriasis, acne, warts—all of them cleared up! Hemorrhoids—cured without surgery! Chronic back pain—gone!

“For the back he uses the needles. The rest is all herbs. Twenty-eight bucks you pay for a visit and the herbs is free. Seven days a week he’s there, nine in the morning till seven at night. . . .”

He himself had been cured of cataracts, he assured me, and now he saw better than he did when he was a boy. At a stoplight he took off his glasses and swung his head around, flashing his clear blue eyes at me. When we got to Seventy-sixth and Lexington he gave me a business card, Chinese on one side, English on the other. “I give out hundreds of these,” he said. “I send everybody I can to him. Believe me, I’m glad to do it!” On the bottom, he showed me, he’d added his own name, Max Fiddler, and his telephone number. “You get good results,” he said, “call me, tell me how it worked out. You’ll do that?”

“I will,” I said. “Definitely.” And I paid him and tipped him and limped over to the brownstone where Hugo Candlemas lived.

I’d met Hugo Candlemas for the first time the previous afternoon. I was in my usual spot behind the counter, seeing what Will Durant had to say about the Medes and the Persians, of whom I knew little aside from the sexual proclivities alluded to in a limerick of dubious ethnological validity. Candlemas was one of three customers crowding my aisles just then. He was browsing quietly in the poetry section, while a regular customer of mine, a doctor at St. Vincent’s, searched the adjacent aisle for the out-of-print mysteries she went through like smallpox through the Plains Indians. My third guest was a superannuated flower child who’d spotted Raffles sunbathing in the window. She’d come in to ooh and ahh over him and ask his

name, and now she was looking through a shelf of art books and setting some volumes aside. If she wound up buying all the ones she'd picked, the sale would pay for a whole lot of Meow Mix.

The doctor was the first to settle up, relieving me of a half-dozen Perry Masons. They were book club editions, a couple of them pretty shabby, but she was a reader, not a collector, and she gave me a twenty and got a little change back.

"Just a few years ago," she said, "these were a buck apiece."

"I can remember when you couldn't give them away," I said, "and now I can't keep them in stock."

"What do you figure it is, people with fond memories of the TV show? I came in the back door—I hated the TV show, but I started reading A. A. Fair and decided, gee, the guy can write, let's see what he's like under his own name. And it turns out they're tough and fast-paced and sassy, not like the television crap at all."

We had a nice conversation, the kind I'd had in mind when I bought the store, and then after she left, the flower matron, Maggie Mason by name, brought up her treasure trove and wrote out a check for \$228.35, which is what those twelve books came to with tax. "I hope Raffles gets a commission on this," she said. "I must have passed this store a hundred times, but it was seeing him that made me come in. He's a wonderful cat."

He is, but how could the ebullient Ms. Mason possibly know that? "Thank you," I said. "He's a hard worker, too."

He hadn't changed position since she came in, except to preen a little while she'd cooed at him. My irony was unintentional—he *is* a hard worker, maintaining Barnegat Books as a wholly rodent-free ecosystem—but it was lost on her anyway. She had, she assured me, the greatest respect for working cats. And off she went, bearing two shopping bags and a perfectly radiant smile.

She had barely cleared the threshold when my third cus-

tomter approached, a faint smile on his face. "Raffles," he said, "is a splendid name for that cat."

"Thank you."

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"And appropriate, I'd say."

What exactly did he mean by that? A. J. Raffles was a character in a book, and the cat was in a bookshop, but that fact alone made the name no more appropriate than Queequeg, say, or Arrowsmith. But A. J. Raffles was also a gentleman burglar, an amateur cracksman, while I was a cracksman myself, albeit a professional.

And how did this chap, white-haired, slight of build, thin as a stick, and very nattily if unseasonably turned out in a suit of brown herringbone tweed and a Tattersall vest—how did he happen to know all this?

Admittedly, it's not the most closely held secret in the world. I have, after all, what they call a criminal record, and if it weren't a matter of record they'd call it something else. I haven't been convicted of anything in a long time, but every now and then I get arrested, and a couple of times in recent years I've had my name in the papers, and not as a seller of rare volumes.

I told myself, like Scarlett (another fine name for a cat), that I'd think about it later, and turned my attention to the book he placed on the counter. It was a small volume, bound in blue cloth, containing the selected poems of Winthrop Mackworth Praed (1802–39). It had been part of the inventory when I bought the store. I had, at one time or another, read most of the poems in it—Praed was a virtuoso at meter and rhyme, if not terribly profound—and it was the sort of book I liked having around. No one had ever expressed any interest in it, and I'd thought I'd own it forever.

It was not without a pang that I rang up \$5.41, made change of ten, and slipped my old friend Praed into a brown paper bag. "I'm kind of sorry to see that book go," I admitted. "It was here when I bought the store."

"It must be difficult," he said. "Parting with cherished volumes."

"It's business," I said. "If I'm not willing to sell them, I shouldn't have them on the shelves."

"Even so," he said, and sighed gently. He had a thin face, hollow in the cheeks, and a white mustache so perfect it looked to have been trimmed one hair at a time. "Mr. Rhodenbarr," he said, his guileless blue eyes searching mine, "I just want to say two words to you. Abel Crowe."

If he hadn't commented on the appropriateness of Raffles's name, I might have heard those two words not as a name at all but as an adjective and a noun.

"Abel Crowe," I said. "I haven't heard that name in years."

"He was a friend of mine, Mr. Rhodenbarr."

"And of mine, Mr.—?"

"Candlemas, Hugo Candlemas."

"It's a pleasure to meet a friend of Abel's."

"It's my pleasure, Mr. Rhodenbarr." We shook hands, and his palm was dry and his grip firm. "I shan't waste words, sir. I have a proposition to put to you, a matter that could be in our mutual interest. The risk is minimal, the potential reward substantial. But time is very much of the essence." He glanced at the open door. "If there were a way we could talk in private without fear of interruption . . ."

Abel Crowe was a fence, the best one I ever knew, a man of unassailable probity in a business where hardly anyone knows the meaning of the word. Abel was also a concentration camp survivor with a sweet tooth the size of a mastodon's and a passion for the writings of Baruch Spinoza. I did business with Abel whenever I had the chance, and never regretted it, until the day he was killed in his own Riverside Drive apartment by a man who—well, never mind. I'd been able to see to it that his killer didn't get away with it, and there was some satisfaction in that, but it didn't bring Abel back.

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And now I had a visitor who'd also been a friend of Abel's, and who had a proposition for me.

I closed the door, turned the lock, hung the BACK IN 5 MINUTES sign in the window, and led Hugo Candlemas to my office in back.